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SUBJECT: MALAYSIA CHOOSES A NEW KING

Summary

11. (SBU) Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin Sultan Mahmud Al Mukatfi Billah Shah, the Sultan of Terengganu and current Deputy King will become the thirteenth "Yang di-Pertuan Agong" or the King of Malaysia for a five-year term effective December 13, 2006, following his election by the Malaysian Conference of Rulers. He will replace the current king Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Syed Putra Jamalullail. The Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah Sultan Badlishah, will become the Deputy King also for a five-year term. The institution of a rotating kingship is unique to Malaysia. The King and the Sultans perform ceremonial functions and serve as the heads of Islam in their respective areas. Mahathir-era constitutional amendments significantly reduced the King and Sultan's discretionary political powers. In theory, the King could play an important role if Malaysia were to face a constitutional crisis. Biographic data on the new King is included with this report. End Summary.

Election of a new King

12. (U) Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi made the announcement of the new monarch on November 3, following the 208th Conference of Rulers. Following Malaysia's unique system of rotating kingship (see below), the Conference elected Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin Sultan Mahmud Al Mukatfi Billah Shah, the Sultan of Terengganu, age 44, as the thirteenth "Yang di-Pertuan Agong" or the King of Malaysia for a five-year term effective December 13, 2006. The Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah Sultan Badlishah, will become the Deputy King also for a five-year term. No controversy appeared to surround the Sultan of Terengganu's election.

13. (U) The institution of rotating kingship is unique to Malaysia. The first Prime Minister of Malaysia (then Malaya) Tunku Abdul Rahman introduced the system to address the potential problem of electing just one of the nine Malay rulers as head of the Federation. He resolved the problem by convincing the Conference of Rulers to elect a King among them for a term of five years, after which the King would retire and return to his state as Ruler. Since independence, all the traditional rulers of all nine states have served as King.

14. (U) Observers draw comparisons between the election of the King and the election of the Pope. Although only nine votes are involved, extreme care is taken to ensure the whole procedure is kept confidential so that the nine rulers do not know how their peers voted. After the votes are cast and counted in the full view of all the rulers and the results announced, the whole procedure is repeated for the election of the Deputy King. The result of the election is then conveyed to the Prime Minister who announces it to the nation. Before the conference is adjourned, the ballot papers are then burnt to ashes in full view of the rulers present.

Powers of the King

15. (U) The powers of the King are derived from the Malaysian Federal Constitution. The King is required by the Constitution to act upon the advice of the PM or by the Cabinet or any Minister authorized by the Cabinet. However, under Article 40 (2) of the Federal Constitution, the King may act in his discretion in the performance of the following functions: [is this a quote from the Constitution?]

"The appointment of a Prime Minister;

"The withholding of consent to a request for the dissolution of Parliament;

"The requisition of a meeting of the Conference of Rulers concerned solely with the privileges, position, honors and dignities of the Their Royal Highnesses, and any action at such a meeting and in any other case mentioned in this Constitution."

16. (U) Apart from these discretionary powers, the King holds the ceremonial position as the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. He is also the head of Islam for the country, his own state and the four states that do not have a Malay Sultan - Melaka, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak. He also appoints the Governors of the four states on the advice of the respective Chief Ministers.

17. (SBU) Former Prime Minister Mahathir successfully fought to circumscribe the powers of the King and traditional rulers, resulting in two amendments to the Constitution in 1983 and in 1993. The 1983 amendments essentially stripped away the King and the Sultans' powers to block legislation. The 1993 amendments removed the legal immunity of the Malay rulers in their personal capacity, so that they may be tried in a Special Court once the Attorney General has given consent. A King can also be removed from his position if five members of the Conference of Rulers vote to remove him.

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18. (SBU) The King does not have a leading role in day-to-day politics or a decisive voice on critical policy issues. In some states, the traditional rulers wield a degree of moral authority, though many observers conclude such authority has eroded over time following scandals (iolvQlthe r0ers(Qd=yinizQtQ0n, Qd0 po-icaQ CQ)bc+q urQnb thel# rt%rw.| evm[tTeleS,othorm Qje KQ0g' | r{hdul dsetrkny pGer c{, ply lz`imSr4ast rolc|ia*Malay3ka were toQtace abons

Bio of the new King

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